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ABSTRACT

Teachers participating in the Teacher Center-United Kingdom Exchange Program at New Mexico State University were required to keep a journal throughout the entire exchange year. The objective of the exercise was to improve writing and reduce writing anxiety among the teachers, and to influence them to implement journal writing in their public school classrooms. Teachers recorded their activities, observations, experiences, and reflections. Major topics suggested for inclusion in the journals were: (1) teacher-child relationships; (2) classroom management structures; (3) teaching methods and materials; (4) curriculum and school programs; (5) family-parent-child relationships; (6) sociocultural structures; (7) recreational/pleasure activities; and (8) curriculum decision making. A summary of the journal was required at the end of the exchange program. A structured writing course, implemented as a follow-up to the exchange experience, is described which provides teachers with guidance in producing a written document, possibly of publication quality, of their experiences. (JD)

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Teacher Exchange in England:

A Model to Improve Writing in the Public Schools

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Teacher Exchange in England:
A Model to Improve Writing in the Public Schools

Recently, the quality of writing in public schools and in undergraduate and graduate courses has been an area of concern which has received an increasing amount of attention. As professors involved in education at the undergraduate and graduate levels, discovering the deficiencies in the writings of our students has led us to seek appropriate means of remediation. Fulwiler (1980) points out that student writing does not improve by simply increasing the quantity of production. Although students need to write, and write frequently, the type of writing is as important as the quantity.

Britton (1975) suggests that "the writing taught in schools today is narrowly conceived" (p. 88). Britton identifies three functional categories of writing: (1) transactional, language to get things done; (2) poetic, language as an art medium; and (3) expressive, language written for oneself. Fulwiler (1980) found that 84% of the writing done by high school seniors was transactional. Although not documented in the research, we feel that this undoubtedly reflects much of the style of writing required at undergraduate and graduate levels. Emig (1971) believes that expressive writing is a type of thinking and probably a cognitive mode of learning. Therefore, as an aid to learning, the process of writing may be even more important than the writing product. While Emig and Britton seem to agree that some forms of written products need to be evaluated, they believe that today's practice of focusing only on transactional-

product writing has a negative effect on the writing and learning abilities of students. One way of overcoming the negative effects of evaluation is the use of student journals. The journal offers numerous writing activities to students of all disciplines. Fulwiler (1980) found that teachers who find value in journal writing often initiate the use of student journals in their own classes.

In the spring of 1982, the opportunity for us to implement journal writing in a course for practicing elementary and secondary teachers presented itself. The course was the first of a series of three required for the NMSU/LC Teacher Center-United Kingdom Exchange Program. This program was the result of a proposal approved by the Dean in the College of Education, Fall 1981. The purpose of the program was to: (1) provide participants opportunities to live and teach in another culture; and (2) to enhance participants' professional growth through the study, analysis and comparison of the educational and cultural characteristics of the two societies. Twenty-seven local teachers elected to participate in the program and to receive nine hours graduate credit. The program was implemented in four phases beginning Spring 1982, and ending Spring 1983.

Phase I: Spring 1982. Participants studied and prepared for the exchange visit to the United Kingdom.

Phase II: Summer 1982. Participants exchanged for three weeks; County of Durham, U.K. Participants lived with their hosts/hostesses and observed and participated in school settings.

Phase III: Fall 1982. Participants analyze and synthesize their study/experiences on exchange program.

Phase IV: Spring 1983. U.K. teachers will visit our participants and will observe and participate in Las Cruces school settings.

We have three concerns apropos to this project. These are:

1. The need to facilitate and maximize cognitive and affective growth of the teacher exchange participants based on their experiences both in their local milieu and in that of the exchange situation.

2. The present-day focus throughout public education to promote and help maintain basic communication skills, especially writing fluency.

3. The need to establish a thread of continuity and maintain group cohesiveness throughout a year-long commitment to a teacher exchange program between Las Cruces, New Mexico, and Durham, England.

Because of these concerns, and in light of the supporting literature, we felt that the use of journals during this year's experience might lead to improved writing and to the reduction of writing anxiety among the students (i.e., the teachers). This, in turn, might influence them to implement a similar program in their own classrooms. Public school students would thus have much to gain in increased writing fluency and reduced writing anxiety.

To this end, participants were required to keep a journal throughout the entire exchange year. Journals were distributed to students within the first few weeks of class, Spring 1982. They were asked to record their planning activities, materials, observations, diary accounts, experiences, reflections, etc. This would serve to provide a basis for documentation of their educational-

cultural observations, perceptions of experiences, and comparative educational-cultural ideas. Major topics to be included in the journals were: (1) teacher-child relationships, (2) classroom management structures, (3) teaching methods and materials, (4) curriculum and school programs, (5) family-parent-child relationships, (6) socio-cultural structures, (7) recreational/pleasure activities, and (8) curriculum decision making.

Students thus maintained their journals during the spring semester and throughout the summer exchange visit. We never asked to see the journals. These were shared with others but only at the discretion of the writer. A summary of the journal was a required assignment due on the first day of class, Fall 1982.

As students discussed the eight categories described previously, they were asked to include objective observations, comparative analyses, and issues and concerns found in both countries. Of particular interest was the degree of impact that the ideas had on them both personally and professionally. They were encouraged to discuss the level of impact through the following categories: Level I: Changed insight, attitude, opinion, approach, concepts, or behavior;or communicated with someone concerning changes that the journalists might make or want to make in their own classroom; Level II: recorded observations and interesting programs, approaches, techniques or materials and considered what these might mean for their situations; and Level III: participated in the experience with no change or significant reaction on the writer's part (Written communication, E. Brooks Smith, Wayne State University, May 1981).

Some journals were maintained diligently, others were simply dated from time to time. The degree of response varied considerably. We, as professors of record, kept journals in order to model the process. Our journals as well as our students' journals are serving as the resources for the articles which are currently being written in the third and final class.

All the course participants are expected to write three group papers and develop a multi-media presentation (with a group paper accompanying the presentation) on various aspects of English education. Papers are expected to be of publication quality.

The third course is entirely structured around the writing process. Students develop rough drafts, improve drafts, and final copies in sequence each of three class meetings. To this end, a unique cooperative arrangement has been developed with two faculty members from the English Department. These two professors work as a team specializing in the writing process.

One member of the team gave the first presentation in a writing workshop the second class period. His focus was on the purposes, procedures and functions of keeping a log. The participants were involved in the process of indexing their journals. He was able to aid the students in the development of the first draft of their writing assignment. Several approaches were recommended: (1) composition of place, which uses the senses, people, nouns and adjectives. Having once developed a list of these, the writer could begin to write a description; (2) brainstorming, which is a form of free writing describing associations; and (3) free writing, which is

probably the most helpful technique, and which is being used by all the participants. Free writing consists of 10 to 15 minutes of unstructured writing. It is the process of getting thoughts down on paper so that there no longer is an empty page. Once the free writing has been accomplished, the writer looks for a "center of gravity" and begins to rewrite. The process may involve several steps: (1) free write, focus, free write, focus, etc., until final draft is completed; or, (2) free write, focus (in determining the focus, the writer must consider the purpose and the audience), identifying points, draft, and final draft; and (3) draft, critique, add content, draft. Based upon the experience with the team members, most participants had completed the first draft by the next class period. The results were encouraging with most students enjoying the process.

Five weeks later, when students were working on drafts for the second assignment, the other team member joined the group. The task which he demonstrated, and encouraged students to participate in was the revising process. He identified the task at hand in terms of a set of concerns: revising, hard work, clarifying, refining, style, transitions, trashing irrelevances, grammatical, transactions to the audience. Two rough drafts of papers ready for revisions were provided to the class for the critiques.

He used two approaches. The first approach looks at three levels of revision, that is, stylistic, structural and substantive. Stylistic level includes vocabulary and sentence structure. The structural level involves shifting either within a paragraph or from paragraph

to paragraph. Substantive level is the decision to change your mind altogether and rewrite.

The second approach utilizes peer critique sheets. The writer reads his/her paper aloud and the audience individually responds to the following questions and returns these responses to the writer:

1. In a few sentences explain what you liked best about the paper and why.

2. In a few sentences write what you want to know more about in the paper. What you would like to understand better.

3. Indicate one place in the paper that needs more work. Note what needs to be done but don't suggest how to do it (Burnham, 1982). This supportive approach is the one that was most utilized by one group while other members preferred to use the first approach.

Participants have written on numerous topics: Learning Experiences and Indirect Instruction; A Language for Life, Implications of the Bullock Report; Children's Interactions: Observations within British Schools; Testing Vocational Courses in England; Art--The Integrator of Curriculum; Student Accountability--A Journal View in Retrospect; and others.

The drafts for the first writing assignment were sketchy and required considerable rewriting. Most of the final products were well done. The second writing assignment seemed to be developed by the groups with more ease and less anxiety. The critiquing processes seem to have produced positive results. Several papers have been well developed and the writers have been encouraged to submit them for publication in appropriate journals.

Each writing group will select two of their final products which will be included in a Teacher Exchange publication. The final course is still operational so analysis of the data must wait. When all the writing products are completed and evaluated, more definitive recommendations can be made. However, there is a strong indication that most of the participants are implementing journal writing in their classrooms. Follow-up reports from the teachers during the next year will give us more information to document what we intuitively believe has been a successful writing program.

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